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## **Review: Innovators in Digital News by Lucy Küng**

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Abstract: A review of Lucy Küng's Innovators in Digital News (2015, University of Oxford).

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## Book review

# Innovators in Digital News

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Lucy Küng's *Innovators in digital news* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd in association with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2015) describes how news organisations “are changing as a result of digitalisation and the internet, and how those who are succeeding in a truly difficult environment are managing to achieve that” (2015, p. 7). Küng's analysis is based on case studies of five profitable, popular legacy and clean-sheet online media organisations in the United States and the United Kingdom: the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, Quartz, BuzzFeed, and Vice Media. Each news outlet provides digital news but differentiates in context and content, i.e., legacy heritage, ownership arrangements or editorial emphasis.

Findings are based on (1) secondary desk research, including a document analysis of the leaked

internal 2014 *New York Time's* Innovation Report, and (2) interviews with top-class editors, managers and executives of the digital news organisations, as well as further industry experts (Küng, 2015, p. 123). The interviewees are some of the most interesting people currently having the most exciting jobs in the news business, and many academics in the field would probably like to talk to them. The interviewees' job titles themselves reveal areas of change within and differences across the selected organisations. Interviewees at the *Guardian* were the Editor-in-Chief, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Guardian US*, the Executive Director of Transformation at the Guardian News & Media, the Executive Editor of Digital at the @Guardian, and the Group Product Manager responsible for *guardian.co.uk*. At the *New York Times*, the CEO and the Senior Vice President of Strategy & Development

### Innovators in Digital News.

By Lucy Küng

I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. in association with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2015

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were interviewed; at Quartz, UK's Executive Director, the Managing Editor, the Director of Communications, and a senior editor; at BuzzFeed, the Editor-in-Chief, the Vice President of Advertising, and the Global Director of Communications; and at Vice Media, the UK's Managing Director, the Head of News Programming in Europe, and a production coordinator were interviewed.

Some may argue that the case studies selected cannot answer the main question posed in Chapter 1, why some news organisations are more successful than others, because no failing, unsuccessful or long-tail outlets are included. Yet the selection is diverse in other organisational characteristics and broadens the view about the diversity of players in the news media market. For example, the initially viral content provider BuzzFeed has hired top journalists, started offering hard news, and thus become a competitor of legacy news outlets, not only on the level of audience attention but also in terms of content.

The book describes the cases according to their business models, finance and audience figures, ownership and/or founders based on secondary data, as well as corporate culture, editorial emphasis, distribution, strategy, and management in

terms of digital challenges based on interviews. Thus, the study can be located within the process level within the typology of media innovations by Bleyen, Lindmark, Ranaivoson, and Ballon (2014).

The book reveals remarkable insights for each case, highlighting its uniqueness and uncovering types of challenges and responses among and across legacy organisations in contrast to pure players. Legacy news organisations struggle with fulfilling demands of both print and online audiences that are described as conflicting by the interviewees. Traditional print content components become more and more unsuitable for mobile or social platforms, which is discussed in detail in the *Guardian* case study. Further, legacy news organisations struggle with a cumbersome newsroom culture, which is debated in the *New York Times* Innovation Report. Coding and applying online technology are important new abilities legacy news organisations acquired and, in contrast, pure players start with. Pure players can more easily chose not to just passively manage the transition from print to online, social, and mobile. What may strike the reader is that converged newsrooms producing for multiple channels in legacy organisations still seem to have more hurdles to manage online news

than online-only players, although the processes of newsroom convergence and multichannel reporting have started some time ago. Pure players did not inherit a difficult legacy but can start from scratch, which seems to be an advantage in the digital age. Furthermore, Quartz and BuzzFeed describe social sharing as the ultimate objective and vital distribution channel highlighting that "you can trick someone to click, but you cannot trick someone to share" (Küng, 2015, p. 62, quoting Ben Smith, BuzzFeed Editor-in-Chief). Native advertising and branded content are discussed as important revenue sources for digital providers. Finally, the pure-player interviewees stress the advantages of being a first- or early-mover: the earlier one starts with video as well as online, social, and mobile, the more time one has for experimenting and learning about users' (and not just readers') preferences, instead of making assumptions.

The final chapter defines seven acquirable or non-imitable abilities in the success of digital news organisations, (1) a sureness and singularity of purpose, (2) unequivocal strategic focus, (3) strong leadership, (4) a future-focused, pro-digital culture that regards digital as opportunity, (5) deep integration of technology and journalism and enough

digital talent, because ‘the future of the news is written in code’, (6) autonomous or decoupled newsroom teams, and (7) an early start.

As a limitation, Küng points out that she “could not get deep insights into innovation processes and organisation culture” (2015, p. 6) through interviews, which leaves room for future studies, e.g., conducting ethnographical methods for even deeper insights. Further, although insights into the five cases are fascinating, financially worse-off digital news organizations may find it hard to employ similar strategies, which is noted by the author. The ability to innovate or just to experiment requires resources that legacy news outlets may not have in terms of funds or financial commitments. This limitation demands future research to extend to less successful or less popular organisations.

Although Küng notes that “industry is ahead of theory” (2015, p. 5), and the findings enrich the debate on innovation in news organisations, a theoretical embedding and a discussion with previous research is missing. The media management perspective of the book can be implemented into strategy literature that has dealt with the firm’s adaptation to a changing environment by means of strategy transformations since Ansoff (1965). It could also be discussed from an institutional

theory framework (North, 1990) or the population ecology perspective (Carroll, 1987; Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Technological change and strategic responses of the digital news organisations could well be systematised using Castrogiovanni’s (1991) multilevel organisational environment consisting of a macro, an aggregation, a task, and sub-environments as well as a resource pool. Technological conditions are ascribed to the macro environment affecting the task environment, which includes “specific customers, suppliers, financiers, and so forth” (Castrogiovanni, 1991, p. 546). Decisions and actions of managers are located in the sub-environment level that is linked to the resource pool, which comprise the main levels of data collection in Küng’s study. Further, Küng’s findings relating to a rigid newsroom culture and an innovator’s dilemma of legacy outlets enhance the notion of a residual fit of traditional competencies by Gilbert (2006), who observes that, although a new context requires competency configuration in news organisations, traditional competencies of a news organisation still fit with the environment and thus cannot fully be changed.

Overall, Küng’s *Innovators in digital news* presents detailed insights into current discussions and transformations of leading digital news organ-

isations and is a must-read for practitioners, researchers and students in media management and journalism.

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